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Marketing and relational aspects of building a competitive advantage in university merger processes in Poland

Introduction

Implementation of the merger at the strategic level consists in the overall management of consolidation understood as a project. This means planning, organizing, leading and controlling the course of the consolidation, the aim of which is the implementation of strategic goals. University merger is a project because it has goals, duration and budget for implementation. One of the subprocesses of the overall process of managing a university merger is the process related to the area of marketing. It is a long-term process, which means that it can be qualified as a project of strategic significance for the university.

Managers of the university merger process should pay special attention to marketing aspects, in particular relational aspects, the value of which significantly gain increases in the period of uncertainty such as the university merger time.

The implementation of the consolidation at the tactical level takes place through project management as well. Plans and timetables of the implementation of various detailed merger areas, which have their own milestones and performance indicators, are created. Frequently encountered projects that form a part of university consolidation include, for example:

- implementation of the new name and logo;
- implementation of appropriate marketing tools and activities;
- implementation of the new IT system;
- implementation of the new education quality system;
- implementation of new human capital management systems (Tirronen, Nokkala 2009: 219–236).

The purpose of this work is to indicate the role of key marketing tools, and relationship marketing in particular, in the university merger process. The research

methodology of the study was based on the results of quantitative research, which were of a pilot nature and a case study of a university that had been merged.

Nature of a university merger

The merger is understood in the scientific literature as a combination of two or more economic entities into a new organism as a consequence of the agreement between these organizations. The acquisition can be defined as the purchase of one business entity by another, the acquired organization penetrates into the structure of the parent organization or functions as a dependent organization (Łopacińska 2014: 583–594). Thus, mergers and acquisitions are two basic types of consolidation of legal entities. The consolidation of organizations refers to cases in which two (or more) independent legal entities become one. The process in which one of the merging organizations stays as a legal entity is called incorporation. A merger takes place when at least two legal entities, acting previously as separate entities, merge into one entity. In this case, the existing owners or founders of the merging organizations receive ownership titles or founding titles in the organization resulting from the merger, and the entities operating before the merger formally cease to exist (Frąckowiak, Lewandowski). Thus, the merger means the legal and economic combination of independent organizations for the purpose of realizing common benefits, while it may apply to entities as wholes or only their parts.

Following G. Harman and V.L. Meek as well as L.C.J. Goedegebuure, a merger in the higher education sector can be defined as a combination of two or more organizations (universities, institutes, post-secondary schools, hospitals). All management control is passed into one managerial body, or person, and all assets and liabilities are transferred to one of these organizations or to the one created as a result of the merger (Harman, Meek 1988; Goedegebuure 1992). L. Delgado and G. Leon propose an even simpler definition, based on the criterion of identity, according to them the merger of the universities takes place in the case of: “two or more partners merging to create one institution that can preserve the name and status of one of them or become a completely new legal entity” (Delgado, Gonzalo 2015).

Study of the competitiveness of the higher education sector in Poland

In recent years, competitiveness is considered a prerequisite for success, and sometimes the survival of the company on the market (Kusa 2005: 146). The study of competitiveness in the sector is nowadays an important process of integrated management system for companies.

Analysis of the sector's competitiveness also sets a certain level of relationship between the company and its environment. In the case of the higher education sector, these are ties between the university and its stakeholders, such as: students, academic and administrative staff, public administration institutions, entrepreneurs etc.

The relationships determined and evaluated in the sectoral analysis are reflected in marketing concepts such as: relationship marketing. One can then talk about coope-tition between universities and cooperation between entities supporting universities (Bang, Melewar, Hemsley-Brown 2019; Hwang Yong-Sik, Yung Kyun Choi 2019: 1-12).

Two scholars said: "the development of private universities has introduced the mechanisms of market play to the field of social life, which until now was entirely subordinated to central state planning and management" (Rozmus, Ordon 2008: 51). This phenomenon has significantly contributed to economic and cultural de-velopment (Chłopecki, Paszczyński, Pomianek 2000: 6). K. Obłój (2008: 3) believes that the world of Polish higher education has become extremely competitive, even deadly competitive claims the author. Constantly growing competition in the sector forces universities to conduct research in the field of competitiveness of the sector.

The basic tool used to study the competitiveness of the higher education sector by academic researchers is the "five forces" model proposed by M.E. Porter. The statement of A. Sulejewicz, equating the higher education sector to the service or industrial sector (Sulejewicz 2006: 79), significantly confirms the rightness of choosing the above method of examining the competitiveness of the sector.

Nature of relationship marketing

Most of the relationship marketing definitions emphasize the need to build a rela-tionship with the client (Krupski 2007: 121). According to L. Berry, "relationship marketing means creating, maintaining and enriching customer relations. Acquiring a new customer is only the first step in the marketing process" (Leonard 1983: 26). E. Gummesson (2008: 5) claims that "relationship marketing is interaction in rela-tionship networks". Others, in turn, like L. Ryals and A. Payne as well as L. Berry, emphasize the importance of maintaining long-term ties with existing customers and gaining more and more share in the expenses of existing customers (Ryals, Payne 2001; Niestrój 2006: 40). According to J. Szymczak and M. Urbaniak (2006: 23-28), managers in Poland more and more often perceive the regularity that clients and cooperation with them constitute a force conditioning the existence and develop-ment of a company on the market. R.M. Morgan and S.D. Hunt (1994) claim that the described concept "refers to any marketing activity aimed at establishing, main-taining and deepening beneficial mutual exchange". There is also a broader and more general way to define relationship marketing. For example, J. Capulsky and M. Wolf (1990: 17) believe that relationship marketing is first and foremost: "the process of

creating a database of already existing and potential clients and getting closer to them with the help of diverse, specific information for every buyer. An analysis of the costs of acquiring and maintaining each client as well as long-term assessments of built relationships should be carried out”.

An interesting direction of analysis is the look at relationship marketing as a concept that integrates different management trends around the concept with clients. M. Mitreęa (2008: 18) believes that “relationship marketing is a kind of synthesis of theoretical concepts derived from various scientific subdisciplines explaining the behavior of enterprises and individuals on the market”.

As a result of the analysis of the literature, one can attempt to define relationship marketing as a comprehensive program to build and maintain strong and positive ties between the company and its environment, including primarily customers, which results in the effective implementation of strategic mission and goals. J. Otto (2004: 120) draws attention to the client’s high value for the company: “the client not only expects value, but also offers it himself”. The concept of relationship marketing directs the company’s strategy to all its partners, both internal and external, creating a network of connections, taking into account the process of competition and cooperation between these networks (Żabiński 2001: 45-57). E. Gummesson (2008: 40), based on his own experience, claims that radical new thinking focused on the company’s relations with the environment is necessary.

Selected elements of relationship marketing used by universities in merger processes

Aiming to increase customer satisfaction

Literature analysis shows a variety of approaches regarding customer satisfaction. In the majority of them, the customer’s satisfaction is largely influenced by his expectations. A. Stewart takes a different position, in his publication on whether customer satisfaction is only the fulfillment of his expectations, he lists six determinants that affect customer satisfaction:

1. customer expectations, for the creation of which the company is responsible;
2. information for the client;
3. satisfaction from information after purchasing/using the product;
4. customer engagement in the product;
5. the mood and other emotions of the client;
6. company image.

In the implementation of the concept of relationship marketing in higher education, great attention is paid to the increase in student satisfaction with the services

offered by the university. Thus, it can be said that student's satisfaction is the state of a positive emotional relationship accompanying the assessment of the results of using an education or training service. In the case of education, it is necessary to measure both the level of customer satisfaction and the implementation of activities aimed at increasing it.

High competition in the sector of higher education services has a significant impact on the university's desire to increase the satisfaction of its students with the services they offer. In the theory of marketing the student's satisfaction translates into the competitive position of the university (Szablowski 2004: 201).

The quality of the educational service

The concept of quality has been the subject of considerations for many academic researchers and practitioners. Although the concept of quality has been functioning for several decades, it is difficult to indicate one commonly accepted definition. In the literature on the subject, many definitions and positions can be found that testify to the complexity of the concept described. D. Garvin (1988: 45-47), distinguishes five views on quality: a transcendental view, a view based on consumer assessment, a view based on product characteristics, a view based on the evaluation of the production process and a view based on value assessment.

A lot of space in the literature on the subject is devoted to the issue of the quality of education at the higher level. The quality of university education services can be compared to the driving force that creates its competitive advantage. As is clear from the definition of service quality presented by S. Trawnicka (1997: 7): "the quality of the service is the overall characteristics of the service that determines its ability to meet identified or anticipated needs", studying and forecasting the needs of university customers plays a key role. Analyzing the quality in higher education, it can be divided into: hard quality and soft quality. This division systematizes the areas in which quality assessment in universities can be made.

The following can be assessed, among others, in hard quality:

- university infrastructure (buildings, library equipment, classrooms, number of places in dormitories, etc.);
- location (access for students, communication, infrastructure concentration);
- teaching staff (number of people with academic degrees and titles: Prof., PhD);
- administrative staff (number and qualifications of administrative staff providing service to students).

The following can, in turn, be analyzed in terms of soft quality:

- level of education;
- places in university rankings;
- types and forms of studies;
- organization of classes.

With regard to the quality of education, the key role is played by the level of education, which is reflected in the competences of university graduates seeking their place on the labor market. The quality of education depends both on the quality of the academic staff and the infrastructure of the university, as well as the adopted strategy and the reputation of the university.

Building customer loyalty

The analysis of the literature on the subject presents different definitions of customer loyalty. According to J. Jacoby and R.W. Chestnut (1978), the concept of loyalty means: “targeted behavior, expressed over a long period of time, being a function of psychological processes, such as making decisions or valuing a chosen brand, while respecting alternative brands”. In turn, T.E. Barry, T.J. Brown and E. Gunst (1997) define loyalty as: “continuous or intentional performance of activities that benefit the object of loyalty and which are done instead of alternative behaviors beneficial to entities other than the object of loyalty”. The goal of customer relationship management is to build relationships that could survive as long as possible. One of the main assumptions of the relationship marketing concept is to maintain long-term, positive relationships with clients.

The concept of loyalty programs has found its application in the marketing activities of universities. The higher education sector is an example in which repeatability of purchase does not play a significant role in defining loyalty. Measures of loyalty will be the strength of identification with the home university, the tendency to strengthen its good image, readiness to participate in the university’s activities during and after graduation, readiness to support university activities and other manifestations indicating a positive relationship with the university. Loyalty activities of universities are directed to two groups of subjects: to students and graduates.

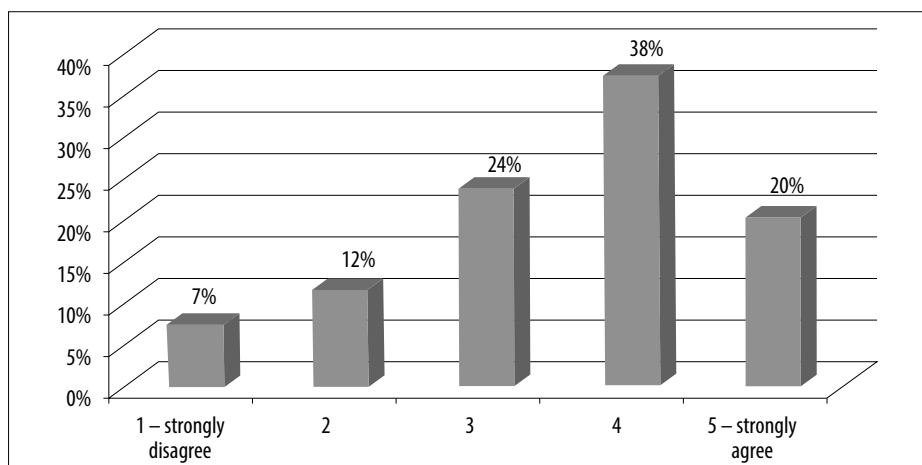
Research results

The research results presented in the this study were based on quantitative and qualitative pilot study. The research was conducted at two private universities that participated in the merger process. The study involved 181 respondents, the results of the research will be presented in tabular and graphic form.

Table 1. Do you think that the merger of your university was necessary?

	1 – strongly disagree	2	3	4	5 – strongly agree
Result (in numbers)	13	21	43	68	36
Result (%)	7%	12%	24%	38%	20%

Source: own study based on the research.



Graph 1. Do you think that the merger of your university was necessary?

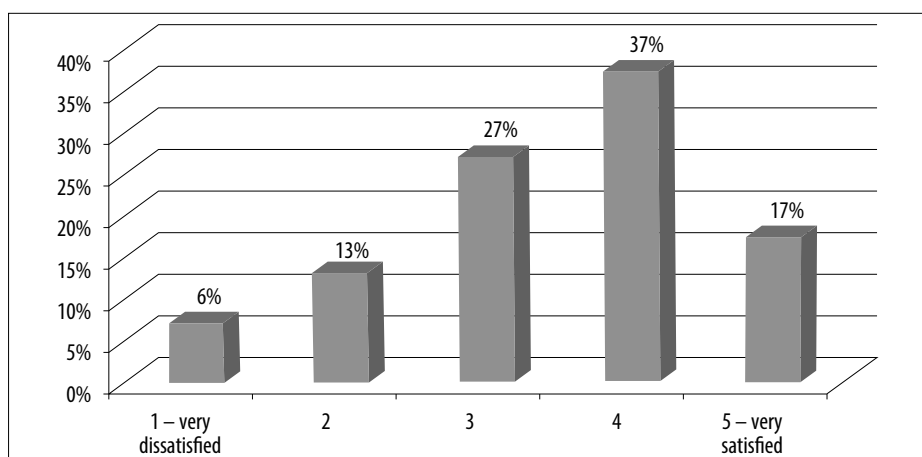
Source: own study based on the research.

More than half of the respondents (58%) think that the university merger process was needed. 24% of respondents have no opinion. About 19% of respondents believe that the merger was unnecessary.

Table 2. Are you satisfied with the merger of your University with another university?

	1 – very dissatisfied	2	3	4	5 – very satisfied
Result (in numbers)	11	23	49	67	31
Result (%)	6%	13%	27%	37%	17%

Source: own study based on the research.



Graph 2. Are you satisfied with the merger of your University with another university?

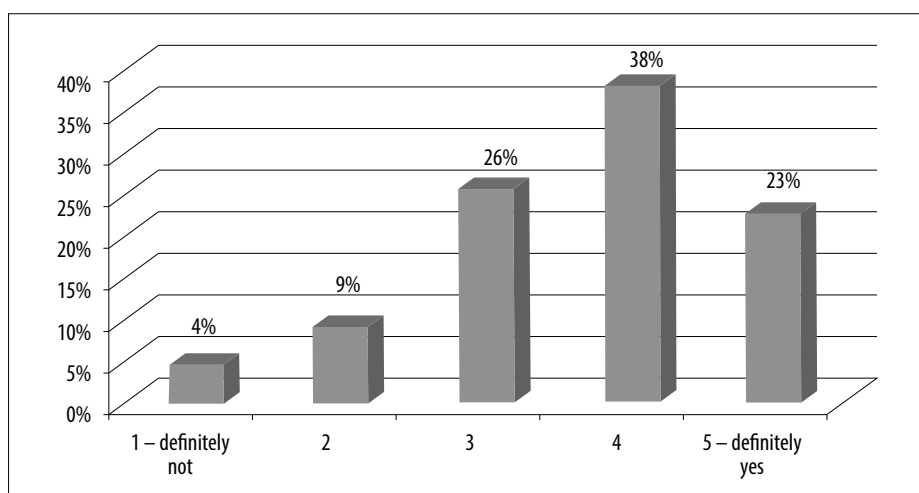
Source: own study based on the research.

54% of the respondents are satisfied with the merger. 18% of the surveyed group indicates their dissatisfaction and 27% of the respondents have no opinion.

Table 3. Do you think that the merger was beneficial for you?

	1 – definitely not	2	3	4	5 – definitely yes
Result (in numbers)	8	16	47	69	41
Result (%)	4%	9%	26%	38%	23%

Source: own study based on the research.



Graph 3. Do you think that the merger was beneficial for you?

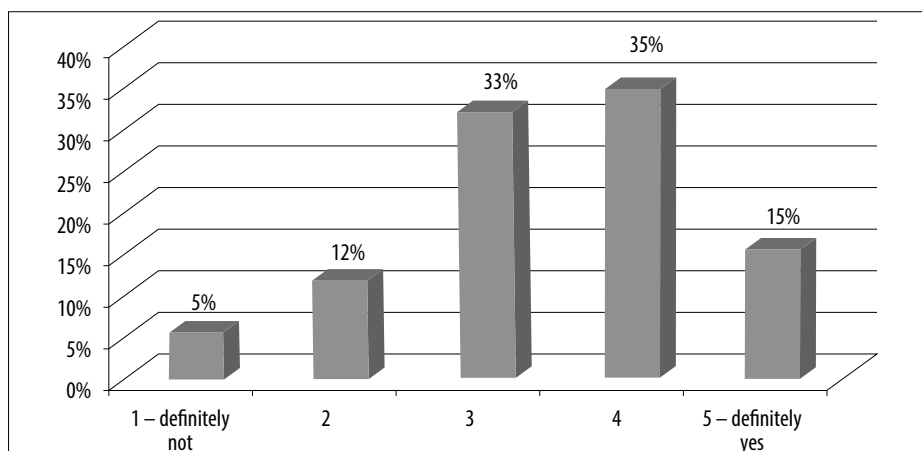
Source: own study based on the research.

61% of the respondents believe that the merger of the two universities was beneficial for them, 11% of respondents believe that the merger did not bring any benefits. 26% of the respondents have no opinion.

Table 4. Do you feel related with the name of the new university that was created as a result of the merger?

	1 – definitely no	2	3	4	5 – definitely yes
Result (in numbers)	9	21	59	64	28
Result (%)	5%	12%	33%	35%	15%

Source: own study based on the research.



Graph 4. Do you feel related with the name of the new university that was created as a result of the merger?

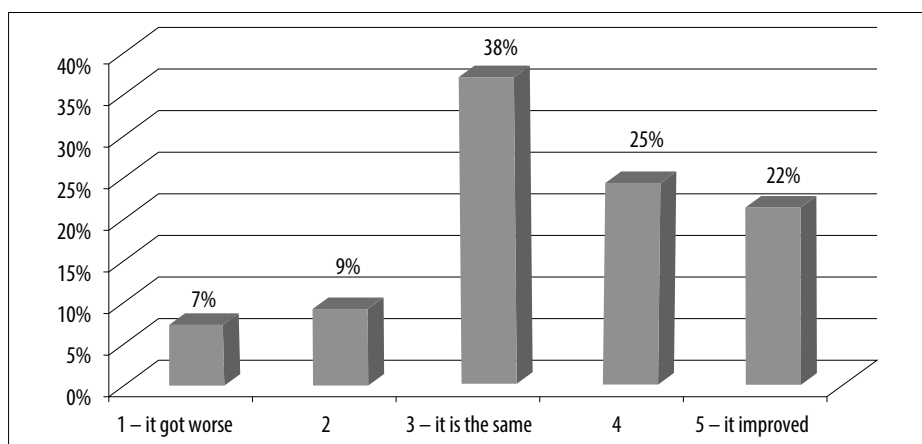
Source: own study based on the research.

Half of the respondents (50%) feel related with the name of the new university that was created as a result of the merger. 17% do not identify themselves with the new university.

Table 5. How has the quality of service in the Dean's office changed after the merger?

Satisfaction	1 – it got worse	2	3 – it is the same	4	5 – it improved
Result (in numbers)	13	16	68	45	39
Result (%)	7%	9%	38%	25%	22%

Source: own study based on the research.



Graph 5. How has the quality of service in the Dean's office changed after the merger?

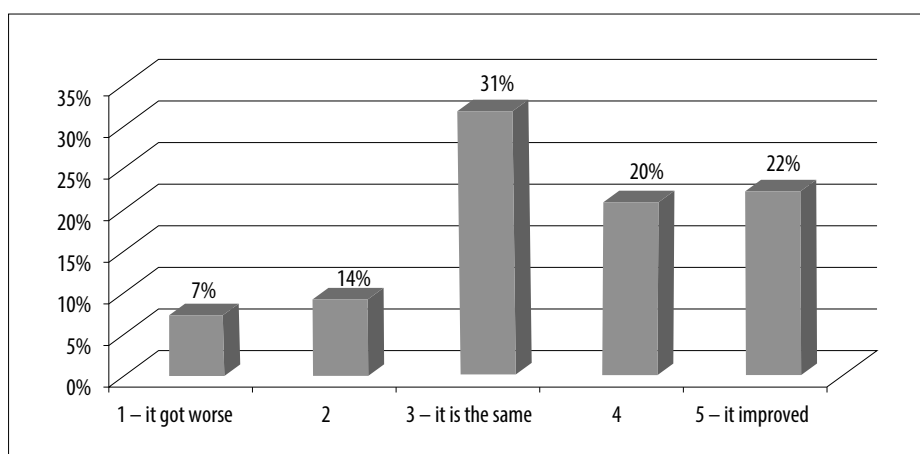
Source: own study based on the research.

The research shows that the merger process has contributed to an increase in the satisfaction with the quality of service in the Dean's office, 47% of the respondents claim so. 16% of the respondents believe that it has changed for the worse. 38% of respondents believe that the quality of service in the dean's office is at the same level.

Table 6. How has the service quality changed in the Student Service Office after the merger?

Satisfaction	1 – it got worse	2	3 – it is the same	4	5 – it improved
Result (in numbers)	14	27	59	39	42
Result (%)	7%	14%	31%	20%	22%

Source: own study based on the research.



Graph 6. How has the service quality changed in the Student Service Office after the merger?

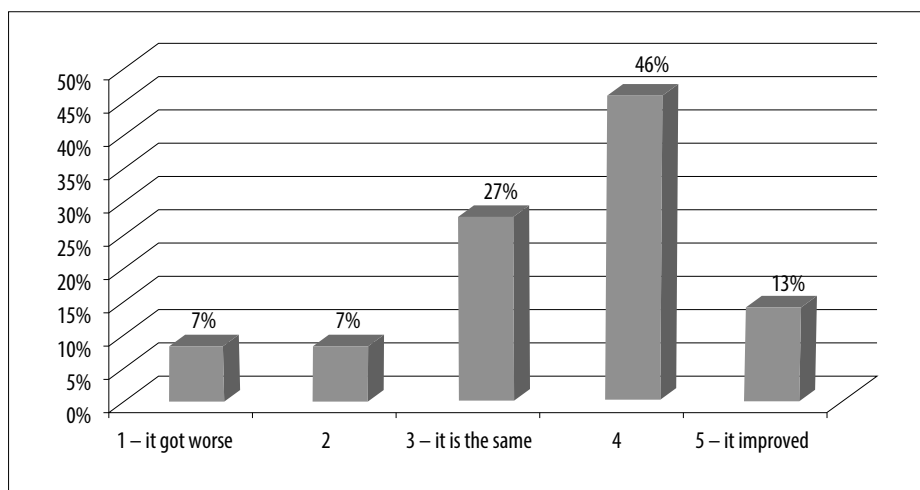
Source: own study based on the research.

42% of the respondents believe that the quality of service in the Student Service Office increased after the merger process. Approximately 30% of respondents think that the quality of service at the Office is the same, 21% of the respondents are of the opinion that the quality of service decreased.

Table 7. How has the offer of the Student Careers Office changed after the merger?

Satisfaction	1 – it got worse	2	3 – it is the same	4	5 – it improved
Result (in numbers)	13	12	75	57	24
Result (%)	7%	7%	27%	46%	13%

Source: own study based on the research.



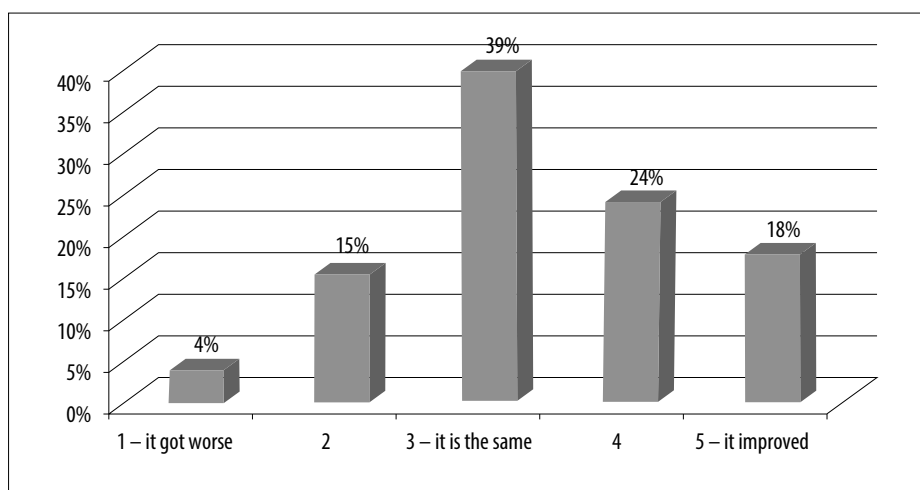
Graph 7. How has the offer of the Student Careers Office changed after the merger?

Source: own study based on the research.

Table 8. How has the possibility of personal development and development of your own interests changed (e.g. scientific associations, participation in conferences, etc.) after the merger?

Satisfaction	1 – it got worse	2	3 – it is the same	4	5 – it improved
Result (in numbers)	7	28	71	43	32
Result (%)	4%	15%	39%	24%	18%

Source: own study based on the research.



Graph 8. How has the possibility of personal development and development of your own interests changed (e.g. scientific associations, participation in conferences, etc.) after the merger?

Source: own study based on the research.

The research shows that over 40% of the respondents claim that the university merger has increased their personal development opportunities and development of their own interests. 19% of respondents believe that these opportunities have changed for worse. About 40% of the respondents feel no difference and believe that the possibilities have not changed.

Case study

Category	University A	University B
Number of students	ca. 17.000	ca 4000
Range	nation-wide	regional
Specialization	social, technical, humanities health sciences (20 disciplines)	security, economy (3 disciplines)
Branches	10: 4 in large agglomerations, 6 medium-sized towns	1: in the region, medium-sized town
Internationalization	average, average share of students and staff from abroad, Erasmus + mobility program, double degree, foreign branch	low, small share of students and staff from abroad, Erasmus + mobility program

The analysis of the interviews conducted with the managers of the universities participating in the merger clearly indicates that the decision to participate in the merger of the university A with the university B was right. For the University A the merger was another stage in the territorial diversification strategy. However, for the university B the merger was a process that enabled its development and further functioning on the market of educational services at a higher level.

Table 9. Results of the interviews with the managers of the universities participating in the merger

Question	Manager I	Manager II
Do you think that the merger of your university was necessary and why?	"We had no choice. The merger was our chance for development".	"Yes, it was a way out of the problems we were struggling with", "the merger gave us a chance to continue functioning".
Do you think that the merger has brought you benefits, if so – what are they?	"Definitely yes", "we have a big partner, known all over Poland, different reception on the local market".	"I do see benefits, as far as I know, not everybody sees them", "many people do not understand the idea of this merger", "we have a bigger field of operation, we can open new areas of education".
Has the offer of the university changed after the merger?	"Our offer has not changed too much", "we have extended the distance learning program".	"Yes and no, we have developed online education, we are improving current programs of study", "we have a better offer of postgraduate studies".
In your opinion, what factors determined the merger?	"We had a few, I cannot talk about some of them, internal issues", "certainly the situation of the university".	"It had to come to that", "we had many problems within the organizational structure".
Has the possibility of personal development and development of your own interests changed (e.g. scientific associations, participation in conferences, etc.) after the merger?	"For students – certainly yes", "there are more offers from the careers office", "for teachers a bit too, we can conduct classes in other university branches".	"Yes, students have more offers, we improved the offer of available associations", "student careers office should also be mentioned – the offer is richer".

Source: own study based on the research.

Summary

Consolidation processes and mergers between universities are an advanced management concept, located in the managerial and quasi-business canon. It belongs to the trend of new public management (NPM). The evolution of the theory and practice of managing public organizations has also led to the development of the concept of public value management (PVM), which is useful for analyses of public sector consolidation. Mergers of public universities have goals that fall within both NPM and PVM logic. University mergers are about strengthening the efficiency of the activities of the universities, their restructuring and rationalization of management, which is located in the canon of the NPM. However, goals related to public value are often more important in the strategic mergers. Thanks to mergers, consolidated universities and national education systems are better recognized in the world, which is associated

with places in international rankings. Stimulation of the wave of mergers also allows for the restructuring of the entire national system of science and higher education. It is possible to rationalize and optimize the network of science and higher education institutions. It seems, therefore, that consolidation processes should be treated pragmatically and not ideologically. It means that one cannot formulate a general opinion about the value of a merger in the system of science and higher education, because it is formed in the organizational process itself.

The example of the merger of the private universities, which took place in Poland, presented in the article shows the opportunities of such processes for the university. The objective of the study was to show the role of marketing tools in the merger process. As it results from the pilot studies carried out, the role of these tools is important. In this case, marketing takes on a relationship role whose task is to build a positive image in relation to the university merger process. One of the main assumptions of the merger is striving to increase the satisfaction of the parties participating in it. These assumptions overlap with the assumptions and tools of the relationship marketing concept. It can be predicted that these tools will be constantly modified and adapted to the changing trends in the higher education sector, including the trend of mergers among universities.

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